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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: JULY 2012

SUR LA LUNE FAIRY TALES

Koschei the Deathless

I first found Sur La Lune Fairy Tales around five years ago and it's one of my favorite sites.

Not only do they provide gorgeous images from antique children's books, but they post the English text for some hard-to-find tales like Il Pentamerone.

There is also an annotated tales section that gives interesting background to a few favorite stories.

I recommend starting with Baba Yaga. About ten years ago, I ran across a copy of this story at an antiquarian bookseller's store in Boston. The book was published in the 1900s and illustrated by Ivan Bilibin. I was hooked.

Ivan Bilibin, 1901.

LEAVE A COMMENT

PUBLISHING

A card once a year would be nice.

I was lying awake last night when I had a sobering thought about publishing. I've never published in the traditional sense; I've only had things online and in magazines. I know twelve authors who have convinced a publishing company to pay for producing and promoting their book, and none of them are fiction writers. It's these twelve people that I'm going to talk about.

Of these twelve, two rely on writing for their income. They are best-selling authors in the true sense; they've made a lot of money for their publishers and have done so for a number of years. They write books with 'legs'. Their work is printed on expensive paper and sells for $25-$45 depending on how long each book is. The publisher makes money on quantity, so is willing to produce a quality book. These authors take pride in their work and only write one book every 5-10 years.

The remaining ten authors have day jobs related to publishing. They are academics associated with a university press; work for a publishing holding company; or for an organization that regularly partners with publishing companies. These ten individuals all have an "in" with the publishing world.

Of these ten, seven will readily admit that they have an "in". They wrote books because it was an appropriate time in their career to do so; they are not particularly interested in their books and find talking about them a little boring. Their books provide an overview of what experts in their field can come to a consensus on, and maybe a survey of the ideas where there is some conflict. These books are usually described as "thought-provoking", only the most sensitive of reviewers will call them "provocative".

These seven authors publish text books, or coffee-table histories, in the $75-$120 price range. At the very least, they publish cheaply-made books in the $30-$40 range. Publishers are hoping to break even; or at best make a little money for a year or two. The audience consists of students who are required to read the book, sycophants or professional colleagues up to six months after publication.

That leaves us with the last three. These authors are reluctant to admit that they have an "in", because they really care about their work and want to believe other people recognize its merits. One of these authors publishes humorous histories that are designed to be "provocative"; but only "controversial" in that they side with the underdog- so that means not really controversial at all. This author's books are well-written, cover interesting topics and are always safe to have on a college-class reading list.

The last two write on topical themes and self-censor. They know that they can't come out and really say what they think without unpleasant political or financial backfire. They say as much as they can and hope that the reader will read between the lines, or at least recognize the bits that were thrown in as red herrings. Their audience is a small group of other experts and cranks who know too much about a topic to be happy with government policy towards it.

These two writers are always called "controversial" and that closes some doors for them; but not enough doors to be uncomfortable. I think a lot of what keeps these people writing is that they like the idea of being writers. Their books are expensive, $65 or more, and are hard to find. I don't think that the publishers expect to make money on them.

So out of the twelve writers I know, two are popular writers who create work that a wide range of people want to read. The vast majority are just spinning wheels to pad their resumes. Three care about what they do, but don't make any money from it.

Let's imagine that my little group of acquaintances is representative of the wider world.

That means 5/6 of the people published are basically subsidized by the 1/6 who write something people want to read. Ouch.

LEAVE A COMMENT

TIGHTER, BRIGHTER

"I've got just a couple of edits."

A long time ago I was an intern at a newspaper in Andover, MA. It was a great place to work; they provided a lot of on-the-job training. I was able to take part in one conference called "Tighter/Brighter Writing."

The thrust of the event was: write at an appropriate level for your audience. Most newspapers are written at a sixth-grade level. This is not because editors expect their readers to be poorly educated; it's because people don't devote their whole attention to the paper, they read it while they're resting.

How do you write to a sixth grade level? The presenter gave a handy metric:

1) Count the first 100 words. (Written numbers, names and hyphenated expressions count as one word.)

2) From that 100, count how many words are over three syllables.

3) Count sentences to the nearest half sentence.

4) Find the average number of words per sentence.

5) Add (the average number of words per sentence) to (the number of words with more than three syllables); call this number 'alpha'.

6) The target audience's education level is alpha * 0.4.

So, my paper typically had thirteen words per sentence with two big words out of 100; (13+2=15)*o.4 = 6. Ergo, the paper was written to a sixth grade level.

Lesson Proffered: If you want a wide audience, express yourself as simply as possible.

2 COMMENTS

POPULAR LITERATURE

Look out, Hemingway.

I'm always on the look out for lit journals that consistently print writing I enjoy. So far, I've really enjoyed Bull {Men's Fiction}. The book reviews are particularly good.

It's called "Men's Fiction"; it's not just for men and it certainly isn't misogynistic in any way. The writing does have a masculine bent to it, which I find refreshing. The content is unusually intelligent and well-informed. Even when I don't agree with what an author is saying, I do find myself thinking "at least he's thought his argument through". Thoughts like that make me happy.

I've bought a two year subscription, so I'll keep you posted.

LEAVE A COMMENT

Jim Henson was a genius. The writing on his series *The Storyteller* is particularly good. My favorite episode is *The Soldier and Death*, enjoy!

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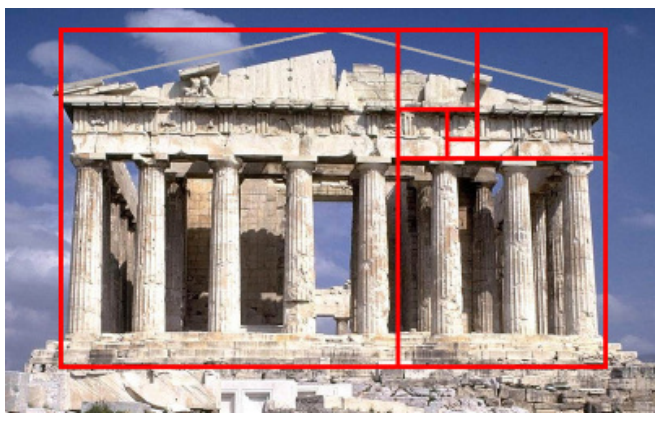
LEAVE A COMMENT

THE GOLDEN SECTION



Golden-Section Rectangles on the Face of the Parthenon.

In my last post I mentioned the “golden section” and I think I should explain what that is.

The golden section is a mathematical concept. It is the proportion of one line to another. In numbers, it’s written as 1:1.618 (approximately).

This proportion has interested people for thousands of years, because it is the proportion of beauty. Rectangles with sides in this proportion are generally considered more beautiful than other rectangles. The ancient Greeks used this proportion in the dimensions of their architecture. Leonardo da Vinci illustrated a book on the golden section. This ratio shows up all over geometry, the natural world and music. Wherever it does show up, the golden section is pleasing. (The major sixth, the figure of a pentagram star, the curl of a nautilus shell, the roof and columns of the Parthenon.)

Scientists like Gustav Fechner have done experiments showing that the golden section is uniquely pleasing to people. I think that the sustained interest in the golden section over the last 2500 years is enough proof of it’s power.
Why should 1:1.618 be so pleasing? The author of *The Divine Proportion*, H.E. Huntley, speculates that there is a subconscious resonance between the time our eyes take to appreciate something is of length X and the time taken to appreciate something is of length X*(1.618).

I’m going to speculate on how the golden section relates to writing. Just like our eyes enjoy information presented at a certain interval, our minds probably enjoy ideas presented at a certain rate. I’ll call that rate the golden reading rate. I’d also be willing to bet that the golden reading rate is something like the rate of conversation or storytelling. After all, we learned to speak and listen before we learned to read and write.

I don’t think that I’m going out on a limb here. Our brains are machines designed to process electrical pulses delivered at time intervals. Every machine has an optimal rate of working: lower than this and the machine is underutilized, higher than this and it melts down. Why should the brain be any different?

In practice, I think the golden reading rate involves maxims like, “one idea per sentence” and “only as many adjectives as are necessary” and “introduce events chronologically”. That’s not an exhaustive list and they probably aren’t hard rules, but provide guide-posts for effective writing.

Thanks to Prof. Jill Britton for the Parthenon photograph.

LEAVE A COMMENT

WHAT WRITERS OWE READERS

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.

I came across this article several days ago.
The Promise of Premise, by Robin Catesby

The article is about the promise authors make to readers. The reader reads because the author promises a story. Character, progression, fulfillment.

If my writing is all about me then I really can't expect anybody else to be interested. Even my mom, really. If I don't respect the reader's time and energy then why should he bother with me?

This begs the question, what does respecting the reader's time and energy look like? The best answer I can think of is not an exhaustive definition: work that sells hundreds of thousands of copies. This is a cop-out on my part. There must be some "golden section" for writing, a rate and way of presenting a sequence of ideas to the reader that is most easily digestible and most emotionally satisfying. The equations mentioned in *The Promise of Premise* must be a step towards defining that golden section.

LEAVE A COMMENT

STUDYING HUMANS

Music I, Gustav Klimt. 1895

I found this quote today and I think it's pretty important:

> *The study of human nature may be thought of as an art with many tools at its disposal, an art closely related to all the other arts, and relevant to them all. In literature and poetry, particularly, this is especially significant. Its primary aim must be to broaden our knowledge of human beings, that is to say, it must enable us all to become better, fuller, and finer people.* — Alfred Adler

This is as close to a definition of "art" as I have found. It's also a guidepost for artists; though Alder was not an artist, he was a psychiatrist. Alder got this idea from the work of Immanuel Kant.

Better, fuller, finer people. These are subjective traits, but I think that there is a lot of agreement on what they mean between people belonging to the same culture. Different groups of people will see better, fuller, finer in wildly different ways. Perhaps that is why some cultures produce different types of art than others and why cultural revolutions are often associated with changes in artistic expression.

But why does he single out literature and poetry? I think it's because these two arts are uniquely able to challenge the audience. They are capable of presenting concrete ideas; ideas that may be foreign to the reader. Painting, music, sculpture, dance- these arts have a tendency to hold a mirror to the face of the viewer. I mean that they show him what he is prepared to see; not necessarily what the artist intended for him to see. This isn't universally the case, of course.

I think that Alder, a psychiatrist, is in a good position to understand the difference between these arts. Psychiatry is (or should be) concerned with understanding people's motivation for their behavior. This can't possibly be a scientific endeavor, because it relies on self-reporting and people will often have incentives to lie. (Try getting insurance once you've been labeled "mentally ill".) In their highest expression, both psychiatry and the arts should have the same goal.

LEAVE A COMMENT

HE DIDNT DESERVE THAT

Some Days Are Like That

Roman and his cousin were walking on a country road. Ahead of them loomed a large mass, recognizable because one paw stuck out awkwardly from the top. Roman was horrified, yet interested. He wondered what had happened to the creature.

“Give it some space Ro, it might not be dead yet,” said his cousin. But Roman was a wise child and he knew that life presented people with the right lesson at the right time; so he picked up a stick from the curb and approached the lump. He gently slid the stick under a strip of ragged fur and lifted it off the tarmac. Long hairs waved in the breeze. There was nothing carnival here, the raccoon was simply dead.

“This was his tail” Ro said softly and returned the tail to the road. The cousin nodded silently. Roman made his way to the opposite side of the body but never took his eyes from it. This was not because he was afraid. The topmost paw had lost its awkwardness and instead seemed to make a graceful gesture of letting go. Or at least, it seemed so to Roman.

“And this is how his face looked when he died.” Ro took a step back and knelt down to contemplate the small head laying lightly on the road. Its jaw looked finely formed yet strong. He retreated a respectful distance back to his cousin.

“Yeah, I’d say it was a car that did it.” Roman tapped his stick in the dust on the curb then looked up, “He didn’t deserve that.”

“Yes, Ro,” said his cousin, “I believe you’re right.”

LEAVE A COMMENT

MODERN WRITING AND STORYTELLING

The Nurnberg Stove

I realized this morning that I use the term “modern writing” to describe two very different things. This is sloppy thinking on my part. I believe it’s best to use “modern writing” to describe writing like that of Ernest Hemingway and “contemporary literary writing” to describe what we’d typically find in a lit journal today.

The distinction between modern and contemporary literary writing is important to me, because I read modern writing for fun and literary writing for self improvement. The former is play, the later is work. I’ve wondered a lot about why I feel this way. I think I find modern writing fun because it’s more like storytelling.

Modern writing evolved from Victorian prose; the modern style is simplier and more direct (like storytelling). How is Victorian-era writing adapted for spoken delivery?

How to Tell Stories to Children, by Sara Cone Bryant.

Bryant adapted written stories for storytelling by condensing them. The 'tellable' version should have a beginning, an end, and a bridge between the two. The bridge must be a clear sequence of events expressed simply and briefly. The bridge should have only the most essential events leading up to the climax.

Hemingway's journalistic writing style is paired down and direct; events are immediate and from the perspective of the narrator. His work follows a lot of Bryant's suggestions for making writen prose "tellable". I've just finished reading *The Sun Also Rises*. It's still fresh and entertaining almost ninty years later.

Modern writing was popular writing, it aimed to entertain the reader. The period of modern writing coincides with the heyday of the short story, when Joe Public read short works by popular writers in widely-circulated magazines. That whole reading culture has pretty much dried up.

So what does a 'tellable' story look like? In her first example, Bryant reduces the story of *The Nurnburg Stove* by Ouida down to its 'tellable' form:

1. Intorduction of Hero and his aspirations.

2. Jealousy of Villain.

3. Crisis

4. Hero's journey to redemption.

5. Resolution

The written version of *The Nurnberg Stove* that Bryant works from is 2400 words long- too long for telling. She never actually says how short is short enough; but less than 3000 words reminds me of flash fiction.

For *The King of the Golden River* by John Ruskin, Bryant recommends pairing down 8000 written words to less than 2400; making the language simpler; and only using essential descriptions. Sometimes I post on storywrite.com; a veteran there recommends posted stories be no more than 2000 words long. Perhaps flash fiction is the heir to modern writing.

It's had to adapt written stories that are highly descriptive and allegorical to storytelling. In my experience, a lot of contemporary literary writing is highly descriptive, highly allegorical and not of the form 'beginning-middle-end'. I have to work hard to read it. Maybe that's why I enjoy reading modern writing more.

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